

Whale washes up on beach

Cause of death investigated

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Beachgoers witnessed a sad sight on Tuesday, April 26 near the first crossover on Duxbury Beach Park – a oneyear- old, 27-foot long, deceased humpback whale that had washed ashore.

By Wednesday morning, a 16-person team from New England Aquarium was on site trying to determine why the juvenile whale died.

Following the autopsy, the whale was to be buried close to where the examination was being performed, on a site just off the beach access road past the second crossover, on the bayside.

year- “This young whale definitely died before it wound up on the beach,” New England Aquarium spokesperson Tony LaCasse. “It was spotted by a boat Monday evening and called into the Coast



New England Aquarium team members look over a old, 27-foot long, humpback whale that washed ashore on Duxbury Beach last Tuesday. Aquarium said officials were on site trying to determine why the juvenile whale died.

Photo by Julie Armstrong

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Guard then. We think it died either late on Sunday or Monday. It was not alive when the boater called it in on Monday.”

LaCasse said the cause of death was not determined but aquarium investigators were concerned by how “skinny this young whale is.” The whale was found to have between 2-7 inches of blubber “and the blubber should be much thicker than that.”

The most common causes of death among whales is getting tangled in fishing gear or being hit by a boat, he said. Neither of these common causes appeared to be the reason for this whale’s death, LaCasse said.

“There was no fishing gear on this whale whatsoever,” he said. “No scarring, no obvious trauma. A run-in with a boat would leave a mark and there aren’t any. The whale is definitely underweight. We hope to get to the bottom of this and find out if there were underlying health problems or an injury in or around the head that affected feeding.”

LaCasse said that the graceful humpback whales, which are known for their acrobatics and “are the stars of the show for whale watch tours off Stellwagen Bank,” are often conceived in the Caribbean, where adult female humpback whales mate and stay for both their pregnancy and the early part of their baby whale’s lives.

The aquarium spokesman said investigators believe the young whale was born either very late in 2014 or early in 2015 and probably was weaned from nursing by her mother in early autumn 2015 and was then off on her own.

“After this weaning period, that first six months to a year is the most vulnerable period for an animal,” LaCasse said. “This whale was in that vulnerable period.”

Duxbury Harbormaster Endangered Species Officer Michael Pforr noted that it may be a few days or possibly weeks before the cause of death is determined by aquarium scientists, but he did know why the whale wound up on Duxbury Beach from where it was first reported as deceased and drifting on Cape Cod Bay Monday.

“The northeast wind and currents are what led it to wash up on the first crossover of Duxbury beach,” Pforr said.

LaCasse said the whale was moved from the beach over to the access road for examination and autopsy to give the Aquarium team a place to perform the examination away from beachgoers. Ultimately, that is where the whale will be buried. “This site is high enough that there is almost no chance of water disturbing the burial site,” he said.

Pforr echoed the aquarium’s decision to bury the whale bayside close to the access road.

“Disposing a whale back into the sea could cause a hazard to navigation and it would likely wash ashore somewhere else,” Pforr said.